

Correctional center inmates make trees for Aurora Festival of Lights

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By **Susan Dibble**

Pam Bellm thought she was going into a business deal when she contacted the Sheridan Correctional Center about having inmates make some of the decorations for the Rotary Club of Aurora's annual Festival of Lights display in Phillips Park.

"I was looking for someone to make them for us cheap," she said.

The Rotary Club received 100 snowflakes last year from the center and 50 lighted Christmas trees this year to add to the more than mile long drive-through display. But the decorations do much more than light up the park, Bellm found.

"We went in there and saw what a difference we made in (the inmates) lives. They were proud of the work they did," Bellm said. "They were thankful to us for giving them an opportunity and we were blown away."

The lighted snowflakes and trees were made by Sheridan inmates who were taking a welding program offered at the center by Mattoon-based Lake Land College.

Peggy Blair, assistant dean at Lake Land, said the holiday decorations were one of the first community projects the welding students did. They are not paid for the work, but the Rotary Club picks up the cost of the materials.

The inmates themselves do not get to see their finished work on display, but some of their families do.

"It gives them self-worth that they are still good people and willing to make a change," Blair said. "It also gives their families a sense of pride."

Phillip Kordowski had never welded before finishing the 9½-month program at Sheridan with high enough grades to become a teacher's aide this year for the class making the holiday trees. He said he enjoyed the look on Bellm's face when she saw the trees.

"I enjoy doing it, especially making the trees," he said. "I know a lot of people are going to enjoy them."

Kordowski, who hopes to have a career in welding when he gets out of prison, said the inmates worked together over several months to complete the project from start to finish. They planned it, ordered the materials, made forms for the design, cut the steel rods to make the trees, welded, painted, did the finishing, and attached the lights.

"It was like an assembly line," he said. "One person would cut and the next one would weld."

Placed in groups of five in the park, the trees stand 4, 6 and 8 feet tall. They are painted white and lighted with colors that are funkier than Rotary Club members might have chosen themselves, Blair admitted. Not that she's complaining.

"They're great. They kind of fill in the blanks in the park," she said.

Derrick Dickerson, who also worked on the trees, said he expects his family and three daughters to drive to Phillips Park to take pictures when they come for a holiday visit.

"It was actually exciting to be doing something for the community," he said. "I think it came out pretty good."

Tom Shaer, director of communications at the Illinois Department of Corrections, said all Illinois correctional facilities have programs to encourage inmates who earn the right through good behavior to be involved in productive work.

Programs under the auspices of Illinois Correctional Industries allow the inmates to earn small hourly wages making products that range from clothing to street signs that are sold at market rates to support the self-sustaining industrial program.

Other work is volunteer and includes disaster relief, maintenance work for municipalities that cannot afford to pay for it, and manufacturing products like those made by the welding students at Sheridan.

"That was strictly part of their training program," Shaer said. "All our facilities make some kind of contribution to the community."

Over the past several years, Illinois has reduced the recidivism rate of inmates returning to prison from 55 percent to 47 percent by focusing on substance abuse treatment, education and providing marketable skills that helps them find employment when they get out, he said.

The welding program, one of a number of vocational programs offered at Sheridan, has 24 students who are taking the training voluntarily, Blair said. Their ages range from 21 to early 50s.

Like other Sheridan inmates, they are doing time of less than three years, often for offenses such as retail theft, burglary and DUI. All are required to participate in substance abuse treatment.

Those in the welding program receive college credit, and the holiday tree project gave them hands-on experience, Blair said.

“It also gives them a sense that they still belong to a community,” she said.

Bellm said the Rotary Club collaborates with many organizations to set up and expand the annual Festival of Lights that includes more than 45 displays, including everything from Santa’s Toy Factory to Old Man Winter. The collaboration with Sheridan and Lake Land College is one the Rotary Club plans to continue.

“It was a win-win situation,” said Mary Dougherty, Festival of Lights manager.

The Festival of Lights display is open 5 to 9 p.m. Sundays through Thursdays and 5 to 10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays through Dec. 26 at Phillips Park, 1000 Ray Moses Drive, Aurora.

Admission is free, but donations are accepted for the charitable organizations that the Rotary supports.

For details, visit www.aurorafestivaloflights.com.